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ABSTRACT

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) undergraduates are a population at-risk of noncompletion of their degrees, but they are almost entirely overlooked in the career-development literature. The Mentoring Web model described in this paper uses resources within the LGB community at a large Southwestern university to provide one-on-one mentoring, focus groups for support and psychoeducation, and a network of resources to support career development and life planning with undergraduates. This combination of services works toward the ultimate goal of degree completion for LGB undergraduate students. (Contains 29 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Christina M. Van Puymbroeck

Research Report #14-01

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Summary

Lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) undergraduates are a population at-risk for non-completion of their degrees, yet are almost entirely overlooked in the career-development literature . The Mentoring Web model described in this article uses resources within the LGB community at a large Southwestern university to provide one-on-one mentoring, focus groups for support and psychoeducation, and a network of resources to support career development and life-planning with undergraduates. This combination of services works towards the ultimate goal of degree completion for LGB undergraduate students.

Introduction

Despite the current emphasis on multiculturalism and diversity in the university setting, lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals are often overlooked even among other marginalized groups as an "invisible minority" (Fassinger, 1991). Even less attention has been paid to career development and life planning with LGB individuals (Elliot, 1993; Etringer, Hillerbrand & Heatherington, 1990; Morgan & Brown, 1991; Orzek, 1985). Although many of the well-known career counseling texts contain thorough sections on counseling culturally different minorities, notably absent is any attention to the issues and needs of LGB clients (Elliot, 1993). In an effort to remedy this deficit, the following article describes a model for a career development and life planning intervention with LGB undergraduate students. The Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Mentoring Web serves the LGB undergraduate community by providing a multifaceted program designed to facilitate the students' scholarly development through a mentoring relationship with a LGB faculty or staff member and personal identity development through workshops and focus groups with other LGB undergraduates.

Overview of lesbian, gay, and bisexual undergraduates' developmental and vocational issues

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual college students comprise an at-risk population based on personal and academic issues. These issues are developmental and may endanger their persistence towards degree completion (Lopez & Chism; 1993; Prince, 1995). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, one out of four lesbian or gay teens are forced to leave home because of conflicts over their sexual orientation (Douris, 1997). In the college population, this translates into LGB students who may not have financial or emotional support

from parents, or who risk losing this support if they decide to 'come out' to their parents ('coming out' is the act of accepting and identifying oneself as LGB, first to oneself, and then to others.) Furthermore, there is evidence that the 'coming out' process itself is potentially disruptive to academic success.

> A....frequent occurrence is the gay college student who in the process of coming out loses motivation for schoolwork because of the flood of feelings and the excitement of finally meeting other gay men like himself. The conflict between attending to his sexual-identity development and his career development is not an easy one to manage alone; yet without support, he can easily be mislabeled or see himself as underachieving, inadequate, or vocationally immature. Because the coming out process occurs at different points in the career development of different individuals, there are too many opportunities for career disruption (Prince, 1995, p.175).

Coming Out

Coming-out has been described as the "arduous developmental process that may extend well into adulthood" (Mc Donald, 1982, p54) that all LGB people go through before achieving a stable self-concept. Not only can this process extend well into adulthood, but it can begin at any age, and is often considered to be a life-long series of decisions about who to disclose this information to, when, and in what circumstances. Lopez and Chism (1993) found that university students reported major interruptions in their academic careers as they faced the issue of coming out. Students cited plummeting academic performance and the need to leave school as possible outcomes of coming out during college.

D'Augelli (1991) indicates that the college years are the times of highest risk for LGB individuals because of the saliency of sexual orientation issues during these years. The immediacy of coming out issues to individuals in college, in addition to the universal college stressors of living away from home, often for the first time, and negotiating course work with social and personal development, leave LGB college students in a precarious and sometimes overwhelming situation.

Cultural minority status

Elliot (1993) suggests that lesbian and gay individuals should be considered members of a nonethnic cultural minority because of the similarity of the effects of marginalization on individuals and their life situations across different minority groups. Some of the group characteristics of LGB people are: secret or semi-secret lives, societal censure, lack of civil rights, ostracism by family of origin, risk of physical violence, and lowered self-esteem due to internalized antigay feelings (Cooper, 1989). Coming-out, however, is a rite of passage unique to LGB persons because this is the only population that has to inform their family of origin about their minority status.

Like other minority group members, LGB people experience considerable employment discrimination. Unlike other minority groups, job discrimination against LGB people is not illegal in most states, and the expression of hostility against gay men and lesbians is more accepted among U.S. citizens than bias against any other group (Herek, 1989).

Impact of LGB orientation on career development and life planning

Morgan and Brown (1991) extended findings from African-American women's career development to lesbian women. Their conclusions (which may apply equally well to gay men,

[Prince, 1995]) indicate that career aspirations and choices are affected by perceptions of the work world which are influenced by gender-based expectations and perceived structural barriers. In fact, perceived opportunity structure was a more powerful predictor of career aspiration than socioeconomic status.

Hetherington et al. (1989) indicate that the relationship between geography and gay and lesbian community size probably has a much larger impact on gay and lesbian career counseling clients than heterosexual clients. In 1991, Fassinger reported that only 13 states provided any degree of employment protection for gays and lesbians. Furthermore, certain parts of the country have larger, more welcoming LGB communities than others, and this fact may increase the importance of geography as a factor in job location considerations.

The decision of whether or not to "pass" as a heterosexual in the labor force is a major issue for LGB adults. In career planning, it is important for these individuals to seriously weigh the costs and benefits of disclosing a homo- or bi- sexual orientation in different types of careers and in different settings. It is important for LGB people to know that passing can lead to a poor self-concept (Berger, 1982) and increased internalization of negative stereotypes (Weinberg & Williams, 1975), that over the years may have a cumulative negative effect (Fischer, 1972). However, widespread and legal discrimination against this population at work may make passing a necessary adaptation. Croteau and Hedstrom (1993) conclude that two issues are central in the careers of LGB adults: the management of anti-gay stigma, and the establishment of supportive and affirming environments. The main choices in managing anti-gay stigma are passing or confrontation. Both have potential costs and the internal experience of the individual is paramount in deciding which choice to make.

In the few studies of LGB career development that have been done, some important differences emerge between lesbian women and gay men on certain vocational issues . Like all women, lesbian women have lower projective earning power than their gay male counterparts. In addition, lesbian women earn substantially less than do comparative groups of heterosexual women with the same educational level and work experience (Morgan & Brown, 1991). Gay men are significantly more dissatisfied with their career choices than lesbian women or nongay men, and have the greatest career uncertainty of all groups (Etringer, Hetherington, & Hillerbrand, 1989; Lange & Elliot, 1990).

Considering the risks and issues that LGB college students face, there is a need for a proactive intervention which addresses issues unique to this at-risk population. An extension from multicultural career development models is the need to assess the student's level of sexual identity awareness and degree of being 'out' as moderating variables in her/his career development and academic decision-making (Prince, 1995). The LGB Mentoring Web Program described here manages these challenges by providing both academic mentoring to increase students' feelings of efficacy (that they can understand and succeed in an academic environment); and support networking opportunities to diminish feelings of isolation and to provide education on relevant issues.

Program Development

The idea for a new model of mentoring and career development for LGB students grew out of the newly formed office of Student Advocacy, under the administration of Student Life. Our intent was to provide services to the currently underserved population of LGB undergraduates with the goal of increasing their persistence to graduation.

The LGB Mentoring Web program is comprised of two components. The first is the scholarly development component which seeks to increase student retention and persistence to graduation by providing academic support and information from an "out" faculty or staff member. The second component focuses on personal identity development and is designed with two purposes in mind:

1) To allow students in the early stages of LGB identity formation to have a peer group with which to discuss the issues that concern them, and to build a sense of community (i.e. that they are not the only ones dealing with these issues)

2) To provide psychoeducational information with the intention of minimizing the disruption in their lives as they confront their sexual minority status. The overall goal of this component was to replace harmful myths and stereotypes with accurate information, and to provide a safe environment for personal growth.

Program Implementation

Using snowball methodology, the program coordinator contacted a convenient sample of first and second-year undergraduates who identify as LGB and were interested in integrating their sexual identity with their personal and professional development. Snowball methodology uses the natural friendship networks among LGB students to publicize the research and maximize recruitment. During the pilot semester, five students aged 19-23 participated in order for the coordinator to gather in-depth data about the structure and content of the program. A number of diverse social identities were represented by the participants who included: a Native-American gay male; a White, gay male who uses a wheelchair; a Jewish lesbian, an African-American bisexual woman; and a White lesbian.

The students completed an interview with the coordinator aimed at defining their interests, goals, and concerns. From the information garnered in the interviews, the students were matched with a faculty or staff person who volunteered as a mentor and was familiar with the student's particular concerns.

Students and mentors met each other and the other participants in an orientation workshop which defined the mission of the program and outlined the responsibilities and roles of all involved parties. Over the course of the semester, students were required to attend three two hour workshops/focus groups addressing relevant topics moderated by the program coordinator. Furthermore, students were required to meet with their mentor on a biweekly basis. All participants were told that the coordinator was available as an additional resource for any concerns or issues that arose.

Session Topics

Understanding Social Identities

In the first session, participants were introduced to the concept of social identities. Social identity was defined as the complex combination of groups we identify with and through which we construct our sense of ourselves in the world. Some of these identities are hidden (e.g. learning disabilities, religious affiliations, and to some degree, sexual orientation), and some are easily discernable (gender, race, physical disability). Sexual orientation is one of these identities, but interplays with the others in unique ways to form truly diverse individuals. In order to illustrate this concept, students participated in an exercise in which they held up hula hoops, each with a different category of social identity (e.g. religion, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation) written on the hoop, and identified their category of inclusion for each hoop

(for example: Mormon, lower-middle, white, bisexual). The hula hoops were used to provide a visual allegory to inclusion in social identity categories.

This exercise led to a discussion of the varying saliencies of different social identities and the development of sexual orientation as a social identity. Students were exposed to several different developmental and theoretical models of sexual orientation and asked to explain which model best suited them.

This discussion was enlightening to several of the students who didn't realize the many ways sexual orientation has been conceptualized, and that not everyone agrees with the static, Kinsey-scale model that is dominant in sexual orientation theory. The Kinsey-scale model is based on Alfred Kinsey's pioneering research on sexual behaviors in the early part of the twentieth century. Kinsey believed that sexual behaviors and attractions could be placed on a seven point continuum from exclusively heterosexual attractions and experiences to exclusively homosexual orientations, with most people falling somewhere between the two extremes (Kinsey, et al. 1948; 1953). Newer models of sexual orientation (e.g. Klein, 1993; Klein et al., 1985) retain the seven point continuum but posit that there are multiple facets, or factors, that define one's sexual orientation which can be located individually on separate scales. For example, Klein et al.'s (1985) model includes sexual attraction, sexual behavior, sexual fantasies, emotional preferences, social preferences, self-identification, and straight/gay lifestyle preference as factors all plotted on separate seven-point, Kinsey-like scales.

Occupational Daydreams

In the second workshop, students discussed their earliest memories of career aspirations, and how and why those goals changed over the years. Links were made between the relationship

of discovering one's sexual orientation and subsequently circumscribing or changing career goals based on sexual orientation. One lesbian woman's earliest career memory was the desire to be a dancer. She abandoned this goal when she realized the implausibility of making a living as a dancer in her early teens. At that point, she began to see herself working in an office environment. However, she voiced more recent fears that she would not be able to work comfortably in a shared office environment if her colleagues knew of her sexual orientation. The other students offered suggestions about types of office environments that could be "gay-friendly" and a gay, male journalism major discussed his feeling of safety and acceptance working at a local newspaper.

Another student presented her struggles with finding a career path because she's always enjoyed mathematics but had no concept of the ways she might utilize this interest in a career or how it would be impacted by homophobia in the workplace. Again, the other students in the focus group attended both to her fears and frustrations, while sharing information about how she could use her talent in math in a work environment where she could feel comfortable.

Life Planning Visualization (From Gelberg & Chojnacki, 1996)

Students were guided through a detailed visualization of a day in their ideal life, ten years in the future. The students were surprised by some of the images that occurred and spent a long time processing the activity with each other and the workshop leader. The group format allowed the members to identify and challenge elements of irrationality or homophobia in each other's visualizations. For instance, one lesbian woman said her image made her sad because she could not imagine a world in which she could live in a "normal" neighborhood with a partner and have a satisfying job at which she could be "out". The group members were able to affirm her concerns

while providing incongruent information (that many people do have satisfying jobs, live in good neighborhoods and are "out" to their colleagues and neighbors). A gay male student was surprised that in his visualization, he worked at home, not out of an office as he previously assumed he would do.

The students reported that this exercise was the most successful of any used in all of the workshops. They felt that the exercise clarified identity issues and encouraged them to work towards their desired outcomes.

Goal-Setting

Participants were asked to record their long (ten years) range goals on paper. They then wrote where they would like to be in six months (medium-range goal), including any short-term goals achieved in the interim. Students put the latter recording in a self-addressed, sealed envelope, to be sent out by the facilitator in six months from the day the exercise was completed.

Goals ranged from getting through midterms, to developing a committed romantic relationship, to coming out to parents before going home for the winter holidays. As students went around and talked about the goals that they had set, they added to their own lists as the ideas of others reminded them of an additional goal.

Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (1985)- Personality Assessment

Each student completed a Myers-Briggs Type Indicator test which yields a description of their personality characteristics on four bipolar dimensions (introversion-extroversion, sensing-intuitive, thinking-feeling, and judging-perceiving). Tests were scored by the facilitator and a group discussion commenced about the implications of personality type in love, work, and academic relationships. Students also received a write-up including a description and the

strengths and weaknesses of each of the sixteen personality types.

The students were excited about taking the instrument and discussing the results. Most of the students felt the instrument yielded an accurate assessment of their personalities and provided insights into the motivations of certain patterns in their lives. One student felt that this information would be helpful in initiating a discussion with his partner about their different ways of approaching certain issues. Several of the students showed an interest in having their partners complete the MBTI as well and were provided with the information about how and where to have this done.

Program Evaluation and Outcomes

The LGB Mentoring Web pilot program was implemented over the course of two academic semesters and included a total of five student participants and five faculty/staff mentors. During the first semester, participants and mentors were recruited and interviewed for suitability in the pilot study. Focus groups were held for the participants and mentors separately to discuss the purpose and goals of the program, and clarify to the responsibilities of everyone involved. During the second semester, workshops were conducted, mentors and participants met biweekly, and informal evaluation data were collected. Informal evaluation data were collected at a final (fourth) focus group towards the end of Spring semester. The data were collected in an open-ended discussion format.

Participants reported feeling high levels of validation and support, becoming more motivated to achieve their personal and academic goals, and an increase in self-esteem over the course of the semester(s). Specifically, students replied that the career planning exercises had opened "windows" to previously unconsidered career options and that the mentoring relationship

gave them confidence that they (the students) would succeed despite their difficulties, in part because their mentors served as examples of people who had walked the same path and been successful. For a student who had recently moved to the area at the beginning of the program, it was helpful to have planned events (focus groups, and regularly scheduled meetings with mentor) at which she knew she could be "out" and receive support during her adjustment to college and a new geographic locale. Another student called his relationship with his mentor "the sunlight in [his] semester".

Changes that the students would make in the program included more focus groups (at least five) during the semester and recruiting participants at the beginning of their college careers in order to allow them to continue in the Web program until graduation. These suggestions speak to the strength of the Web program, as students sought more involvement in the program, despite their already hectic schedules.

Mentor feedback was collected via phone calls to each mentor by the program coordinator at the close of the pilot program. Four of the five mentors reported they felt the relationship had been a success, and they enjoyed the opportunity to support the LGB undergraduate community in this structured format. The fifth mentor felt the meetings had been inconsistent, and would like to see the program further structured to plan ahead of time the mentor-participant meetings for the entire semester. However, the participant who worked with this mentor felt that her needs had been met by scheduling meetings on a week to week basis as her busy work schedule allowed.

The program was successful in all of its aims. It provided a safe environment for students to address their concerns regarding the relationship of their life and career goals with their burgeoning sexual identities. As a result of the focus groups, students felt less isolated and began

to see themselves as part of a supportive community. They received psychoeducation pertaining to career and life planning and all expressed a renewed commitment to their clarified goals. Furthermore, participation in the mentoring component brought students together with faculty and staff members whom they otherwise were unlikely to meet, and increased students' sense of responsibility and capacity to succeed.

Due to the nature of this pilot study, the evaluation data collected were informal and based on a small number of participants. However, the feedback that was received indicates the potential importance of providing this type of program on a much larger scale. The goal of this article was to provide a model for higher education professionals who are interested in developing a similar program to increase the persistence of LGB undergraduates to degree completion. It is critical that more systematic data collection and comprehensive evaluation take place in future programs of this nature to empirically measure changes the participants may undergo, as well as persistence to degree completion. To this end, the use of established assessment instruments to measure variables related to adjustment as well as access to the university enrollment data base may prove valuable in documenting the benefits of participation.

Conclusion

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual undergraduates are a population at risk of not completing their college degrees who have largely been ignored in the career development literature (Lopez & Chism; 1993; Prince, 1995). The LGB Mentoring Web represents a first step to addressing the concerns of this population and developing appropriate services to ensure the success of this population in the university.

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual students are increasingly demanding support services equivalent

to those established for other marginalized groups at-risk for not completing their degrees. Recent research has shown that LGB students are increasingly taking into account the support services available when deciding where to attend college (Gideonse, 1998). An administrator at one of the nation's first resource centers for lesbian and gay students at University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia reports "We get an increasing number of calls and visits from high school seniors and juniors saying that [the way a school handles concerns for gay students] is one of the primary criterion they're using to make their decision" (Gideonse, 1998, p39). Having programmatic components to address the concerns specific to this population is becoming a issue that student administrations can no longer afford to ignore. Programs such as the LGB Mentoring Web can offer the systematic support and structure that an undergraduate needs to successfully complete his or her college education.

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